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Abstract

Although feminist and post-colonial discourses share much in common, the amount of genuine cross-fertilisation between the two is scant. Studies of post-colonial women writers tend to concentrate heavily on the social and political oppression of women, with little attention to the question of woman's language or to the possibilities of a specifically post-colonial feminist theory. On the other hand feminist theorists in general tend to be deeply eurocentric in their assumptions. The very ways in which feminist theory is dichotomised - French and Anglo American - excludes post-colonial feminists, as though they are merely appendages to one or other imperial camp. Post-colonial feminists suffer not just a double colonisation, as Petersen and Rutherford (1985) put it, but a triple. What this distinction of French vs. Anglo American overlooks is precisely what post-colonialism can highlight; that the argument is between the French and English speaking feminisms, and the persistence of critics in dichotomising feminism in this way completely overlooks the danger lying in a label which relies directly on the binary structuration of patriarchal discourse.

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One function of this paper is to show how a greater cross-fertilisation of ideas and theoretical strategies may be of benefit to both discourses. Both are articulated by resistance to dominant authoritarian and neo-authoritarian orthodoxy and both speak from their position within the hegemonic language to subvert that language. But the most profound similarity is probably the extent to which both 'woman' and 'post-colonial' exist outside representation itself. For Luce Irigaray, woman is 'absence, negativity, the dark continent or at best a lesser man'. In patriarchal, eurocentric, phallogocentric culture the feminine and the post-colonial both exist in this dark chthonic region of otherness and non-being.

AUTHORITARIAN STRATEGIES OF RE-INCORPORATION

Both feminism and post-colonialism suffer the processes of hegemonic re-incorporation by which the imperial/patriarchal centre actually draws subversive elements back into itself. For instance, one of the most insidious denials of the validity of post-colonialism is the suggestion that it demonstrates the outworking of a world-wide spread of **post-modernism**, and thus becomes simply another manifestation of a European cultural movement. The attitude itself is far more widespread than organised written expositions of the idea would suggest. But because it has the status of a prejudice it is much more insidious. The same danger lies in wait for feminism.

Modern feminism leaves itself vulnerable to such charges however, by its often unquestioning adoption of **post-structuralism**. Without commenting at all on the actual premises and strategies of discourse analysis or deconstruction, nor the specific practice of individuals, I would say it is essential for such anti-authoritarian discourses as feminism and post-colonialism to be aware of the ominous intellectual orthodoxy post-structuralism has become in the last fifteen years. So we must look with caution at Jane Gallop's contention that 'the composite word declares the inextricable collusion of phallogentrism and logocentrism ... and unites feminism and deconstructive "grammatological" philosophy in their opposition to a common enemy' (Gallop 1976, p. 30). This may or may not be true but it disregards the extent to which grammatological philosophy itself is positioned within patriarchy and the extent to which its recent dominance reflects the usual trajectory of both patriarchal and eurocentric intellectual hegemony.

A much harder issue to talk about is the incorporation of these discourses into the authoritarian structure of **academic study**. Harder, because this paper could be seen as one example of it. Hélène Cixous, for instance, is pessimistic about the future of the women's movement and of feminist scholarship. Research on women, she argues, has reached a dead-end largely because of the traditional, hierarchical university structures within which it take its place. Thus women's studies, like interdisciplinary studies or Post-colonial literature, is thrown the bone of a separate course and the system can go on unchanged. This affects Post-colonial literature far more because it is further removed from the eurocentric orientation of English departments (into which women's writers courses can be more easily fitted). But generally they are incorporated into an existing structure as a way of keeping them marginalised.

AN 'AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE'

The key to any comparison between feminism and post-colonialism is their concern with language and writing. Although it is through language that the subversion of the imperial/patriarchal can be achieved, both run the risk in their search for an 'authentic language' of an insupportable essentialism.¹ While both share a sense of disarticulation from an inherited language, many post-colonial societies have the apparent advantage of a pre-existing language or a range of named objects and features of place with which language can be changed. Attempts by feminists to recover a primal feminine language, 'a woman's sentence', as Virginia Woolf put it, falls time and again into a peculiar dilemma. For the idea of an essentially distinctive woman's or post-colonial or national sentence founders upon attempts to define its *uniquely* distinguishing characteristics.

In *Man Made Language* the Australian Dale Spender demonstrates the dangers of the so-called Anglo-American position very clearly when she says

the English language has been literally man made and ... it is still primarily under male control ... This monopoly over language is one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy, and consequently have ensured the invisibility or 'other' nature of females, and this primacy is perpetuated while women continue to use, unchanged, the language which we have inherited. (Spender 1980, p. 12)

Now this perception seems to concur quite closely with post-colonial views of language history in which the master tongue becomes the prime means of cultural control, supported by overt language policies and a colonial education system. Indeed it seems even more appropriate to those colonial systems where the anglocentric content of education appears to be quite clearly alien to the particular society in which individuals are being educated. But the problem with such a crudely conspiratorial theory of language as 'man-made' or 'metropolitan-made' and a male plot against women or a eurocentric plot against the post-colonial culture, posits an origin to language, a kind of non-linguistic transcendental signifier, or a transcendental conspirator, a concept which cannot be supported. The theory of language which post-colonial experience confirms is the kind of relational view of meaning which Kristeva has developed from such theorists as Volosinov. That is, languages are not conceived as structures or systems, and thus cannot be seen to be either sexist or imperialist *per se* but in the way they are utilised with the socio-historic dynamic of oppression.

Kristeva comes closest to the post-colonial view of language use in the concepts of marginality and subversion. For both discourses, the way out of the essentialist trap in their conceptions of language is in a shift away from the Saussurian concept of *langue* towards a re-establishment of the speaking subject as an object for linguistics. The speaking subject is not a transcendental or Cartesian ego but a positioning of the subject within the activities and changes of discourse, neither as its originator nor its cypher. Language is a process rather than a system - something people do, and although 'language speaks' in the sense that it provides the linguistic options to speakers, it is in the acts of speakers rather than the structure of the system that language has its being.

In rejecting the notion of an essentially sexist or imperialist language the way is open for a coherent theory of *appropriation*. The problem for essentialist feminisms is that by asserting on one hand that the Otherness of woman is a construction of patriarchy and yet that it is out of this otherness that a female language must be constructed or recovered, it falls into the kind of dilemma Shoshana Felman sees Luce Irigaray facing when she presents herself as a woman theorist or a theorist of woman.

If 'the woman' is precisely the Other of any conceivable Western theoretical locus of speech, how can the woman as such be speaking in this book? Who is speaking here, and who is asserting the otherness of woman? If as Luce Irigaray suggests, the woman's silence or the repression of her capacity to speak, are constitutive of philosophy and of theoretical discourse as such, from what theoretical locus is Luce Irigaray herself speaking in order to develop her own theoretical discourse about women? (Felman 1975, p. 3)

At this point post-colonialism can be of some use. For the woman may not speak so much from the position of her *exclusion* from language as from the position of its inadequacy for her experience.² In other words the woman and the post-colonial speak from the *margins* of language. As Wilson Harris has shown, the language can be reformed from the margins by an infinite rehearsal which allows it to erode its own biases, and continually regenerate itself. It is in seizing and refashioning the patriarchal language that the 'silenced' voice can be heard. Thus the Canadian writer Dennis Lee says 'Beneath the words our absentee masters have given us, there is an undermining silence. It saps our nerve. And beneath that silence, there is a raw welter of cadence that tumbles and strains toward words and that makes the silence a blessing because it hushes easy speech. That cadence is home...' (Lee 1974, p. 164). Lee describes his own experience of seeing writers all around him using words while he simply 'gagged'. Writing had become a problem to itself, 'it had grown into a search for authenticity, but all it could

manage to be was a symptom of inauthenticity'. This inauthenticity comes not from the language *per se*, but from the situation of the language in its particular complex of discursive relations. The language becomes a tool for constructing a different reality by initiating different forms of language use. It is invested with strategic markers through the process of naming, and adapted to the linguistic processes of a prior and indigenous, or in the case of settler cultures, a developing and indigenising vernacular language. Thus for both feminism and post-colonialism the 'authentic' language is one whose authenticity itself is constructed in the process of constructing the feminine and post-colonial subject.

WRITING THE BODY / WRITING PLACE

Part of the process of liberating what Lee calls the 'cadence of home' in post-colonial writing is the reconceiving of the lived space within which difference is focussed. This need to write out of a sense of place is equivalent to the exhortations of *écriture féminine* to 'write the body'. Cixous says

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement. (Cixous 1975a, p. 245)

Again we have to note that the image here of severance and exclusion, women driven from their bodies, is tempered by the post-colonial view of exclusion through the *inadequacy* of or unrealised possibilities of language. The theory of appropriation shows that the re-entry into the text can be a gradual revolution, but the revolution comes from the surplus, the overflow of linguistic potential. In most respects it would seem that the settler colonies had a greater problem in writing out of their sense of place, because place had to be constructed in that writing. But this is precisely how women must 'write their bodies', by reconstructing, revisioning the body as a site of difference.

In this respect feminism bears the greatest resemblance to post-colonial *settler* cultures, because neither have a past or alternative language with which to assert identity. That alternative 'authentic' language must be created at the site of struggle. White European settlers in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand faced the problem of establishing their 'indigeneity' and distinguishing it from a continuing sense of their European inheritance. In this respect their situation differs

from that of Indians or Africans whose problem was to 'retrieve' their culture and with it write out of some primordial sense of place at the end of a period of foreign rule. Yet even so both had to *create* the indigenous, to discover and re-invent what they perceived to be, in Emerson's phrase, their 'original relation with the universe' (Emerson 1836, p. 21).

This 'original relation' is not a 'return' to European origins. The relation between the people and the land is new, as is that between the imported language and the land, so the 'original' relationship, like the language, must be created anew. In the same way, any native 'mother' tongue is actually patriarchal, so feminists must recreate in language their own original relationship with the excluded and negated subjectivity located in their bodies. The body of woman is not there as some kind of transcendental given. It must be constructed imaginatively just as place is constructed. Thus, although the variety, the exuberance, the plenitude of writing, is held to emerge from the multiplicity, the orgasmic overflowing of female pleasure or *jouissance*, by the same process this 'original relation' is constructed and reconstructed in writing out of a difference and a marginality that is appropriated as a force. There is, says Cixous, 'no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have *in common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes - any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another' (Cixous, 1975a, p. 246). Writing out of this richness, which is at the same time the creation of such richness, the creation of a subversive multiplicity, is held by Cixous to confront the patriarchal binary assumptions which lie within language, a binary opposition in which the feminine is always seen as the negative, powerless instance. Similarly, writing post-colonial 'place' is not writing the lineaments of some geographical given but writing out of a difference which seeks to dismantle the binary structures in which the colonial margin is negated. (In fact, the notion of *placelessness* is a crucial feature of the discourse of place in post-colonial societies.) Like the exponents of *écriture féminine*, Wilson Harris also uses language in a way which specifically and deliberately disturbs attendant assumptions within imperial/patriarchal language, particularly its binary structuration. This pattern of binary structuration in European and many other languages, Harris asserts, lies at the root of the ceaseless pattern of conquest and domination that has formed the fabric of human history (Harris, 1983). Consequently Harris takes direct issue with language in all his works and effects a radical disruption of its binary bases. In works such as *Ascent To Omai* the word, says Gregory Shaw, is

'liberated', hollowed out, emptied, through a dialectical process of paired contradictions.... Images crumble, shift, dissolve, and coalesce in strange combinations, or, to use Harris' own term, 'paradoxical juxtapositions', reflecting a universe in the process of becoming. ... Harris' works constitute a programme for the dismantling of myth, a dismantling of history and society, of the object and even the word. (Shaw 1985, p. 125)

It is interesting to speculate how well such a description might apply to the *écriture féminine*. West Indian groups and individuals have always been intensely involved in the 'struggle over the word' in making the only language available 'native' to Caribbean person and place. And it is this struggle over the word, rather than any sense of definition or subjective origin which adumbrates the process of writing from the body and from place. But it is true for all post-colonial writers. As Dennis Lee says, 'The colonial writer does not have words of his own. Is it not possible that he projects his own condition of voicelessness into whatever he creates? That he articulates his own powerlessness, in the face of alien words, by seeking out fresh tales of victims? (Lee 1974, p. 162). 'The language,' he says, 'was drenched with our non belonging ... and words had become the enemy' (Lee 1974, p. 163). For this dilemma Cixous seems to provide the answer: 'A woman's body, with its thousand thresholds of ardour - once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction - will make the old single grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language' (Cixous 1975a, p. 256). Nothing could better describe the way english 'the single grooved' patriarchal tongue is made, today, to 'reverberate' with a profusion of possibilities for discourse. With the intervention of the post-colonial *vernacular*, the imperial fiction of standard English has become a profusion of 'englishes'.

Gilbert and Gubar go so far as to say that woman's language is the vernacular. In their essay 'Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality' (1985) they refute Cixous' contention that the *écriture féminine* has not yet arrived by claiming that the vernacular, the mother tongue, spoken by women and children and suppressed by the formalised father tongue is indeed a woman's language. Although this seems to suggest itself as the basis for a post-colonial feminist linguistics, I think Gilbert and Gubar misunderstand Cixous' view of *écriture féminine* as an array of potentialities for linguistic subversion. It also misses the point that whether the vernacular was there before the patriarchal language or not, it is not recovered in woman's or post-colonial discourse, but *re-invented* just as the 'original relation' with place is re-invented.

MATERNITY / NATIONALITY

One crucial feature of the body which women are exhorted by Cixous to 'write' is that it is also the maternal body. The libido must be expressed in terms of maternity, she contends, since the potential to give birth is the primary indicator of feminine difference. 'Woman,' says Cixous, 'is never far from the mother' (Cixous 1975b, p. 173) she is 'always in a certain way, "mother" to herself and the other' (Cixous 1975b, p. 56).

Although, as Kristeva points out, motherhood can favour feminine creation, it is in the relationship of mothers and daughters that the most radical possibilities of maternity seem located. Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Woman Born*,

This is the core of my book, and I enter it as a woman who, born between her mother's legs, has time after time and in different ways tried to return to her mother, to repossess her and be repossessed by her, to find the mutual confirmation from and with another woman that daughters and mothers alike hunger for, pull away from, make possible or impossible for each other. (Rich 1976, p. 218)

For many feminists the mother-daughter relationship is crucial in the process of subversion because it is one which implicates the female body and the female subject in primary processes which are held to permeate writing. It is in the pre-patriarchal, pre-oedipal relationship of mothers and daughters that a feminine language might seem to be grounded. And it is from this stage that the semiotic, the pre-verbal conditions of *écriture féminine* arise.

My contention here is that this desire for a return to the original pre-oedipal relationship with the mother replicates the desire within post-colonial discourse to return to an original pre-colonial relationship with the sense of a community *which gave you birth* even though in historical terms this might be an illusion.³ As with the linking of the body and the maternal body in feminism, the link between place and nation is on some levels inextricable. To link the maternal and the national in this way might appear contentious since the current orthodoxy is that nationalism is the expression of patriarchy *par excellence*. But the development of a nationalism in post-colonial societies is initially focussed on the assertion of difference rather than of domination. In this respect nationalism is a stage which must be passed through in order to most firmly sever those ties with the European presence, which are bound to lock it within the imperial/patriarchal discourse.

An interesting demonstration of the link between mother and nation is Mary Gilmore's poem, 'Nationality':

I have grown past hate and bitterness,
I see the world as one;
But though I can no longer hate,
My son is still my son.

All men at God's round table sit,
And all men must be fed;
But this loaf in my hand,
This loaf is my son's bread

(Gilmore 1948, p. 287)

The first thing that strikes me about this is the very clear depiction of nationalism in terms of motherhood. But its second feature is the way Gilmore is speaking quite clearly from patriarchal discourse which privileges and mystifies the mother-son relationship to the exclusion of all others. Nevertheless I would contend that even in Gilmore's poetry which is struggling hard with patriarchal discourse, although still locked within it, the linking of the maternal and the national stems directly from the need to subvert the Law of the Father⁴ which is also the Law of Empire. No matter what historical forces might have brought it into being the imaginative invention of nationality is an attempt to construct the primordial under the guise of recovering it.

BISEXUALITY / CULTURAL SYNCRETICITY

The attraction to an authentic language means that both feminism and post-colonialism wrestle with the constant danger of essentialism: on the one hand the fallacy of the transcendental feminine subject acting as the focus of feminine discourse, on the other, the belief in an essential cultural purity which can be recovered as the focus of national and cultural identity. The movement to combat these tendencies within feminism and post-colonialism themselves therefore leads to a subversion of some of the most fundamental binary structures, on the one hand a subversion of the separation between male and female, on the other a rejection of a distinction between a 'pure' and 'impure' cultural identity.

In post-colonial theory the most advanced exponents of cultural syncretism are writers from the Caribbean whose societies have developed from the most complex range of influences. For Edward Kamau Brathwaite, it is through a process of *creolisation*, of hybridisation that 'we become ourselves, truly our own creators, discovering word for object, image for the word' (Brathwaite 1974, p. 42). Denis Williams, in his essays and art, proposes the 'catalysis' model of Guyanese society in which a catalytic interaction occurs in which 'each racial group qualifies,

and diminishes, the self-image of the other' (Williams 1969, p. 19). Jacques Stephen Alexis opposes the idea of a monolithic solidarity of an African diaspora captured in the term 'Black Writing'. In an essay called 'Of the Marvellous Realism of the Haitians', he reveals the synthesis of European, African and Amerindian which forms the genesis of Haitian art and reveals the 'contradictory character of human consciousness' (Alexis 1956, p. 267).

But the theorist of syncretism par excellence is Wilson Harris. Harris has a profound belief in the possibilities of (individual and communal) psychic regeneration through catastrophe. Even race hatred and race oppression by their own energies savagely deconstruct themselves, seeking to 'erode their own biases' (Harris 1985, p. 127), and to dismantle their binary oppositional bases. In the time scale of 'the womb of space' the original human ancestors are ancestors of all. The annihilation of the Caribs and the atrocities of slavery energise one field of historical activity which eventually results in the contemporary Caribbean mixing of all peoples, returning them to an original 'shared' ancestry. To effect this return language must be altered, its power to fix beliefs and attitudes must be exposed, and words and concepts 'freed' to associate in new ways. As Harris's work points out most clearly, syncreticity is not a view of culture limited to the Caribbean but one which reviews our notions of cultural identity itself. Such a review pushes cultural identity beyond the limited and localising nationalism which marks an early stage of post-colonial political development, and introduces a view of the hybridity and complexity of all cultures.

Similarly the issue of sexual syncretism reflects some of the most radical explorations of recent feminism. This same syncretic impulse prompted Kristeva at one stage to reject feminism as a fundamentally unanalyzed view, caught in the concept of a separate identity and unaware of the nature of its relation to political power. She proposed an alternative to feminism which would acknowledge our theoretical bisexuality, the self's 'capacity to explore the entire range of meanings possible, including those which create meaning and those which multiply it, pulverize it and make it new' (Kristeva 1974, p. 99).

As Cixous also points out, the very bifurcation of male and female imprisons us within the binary structures of patriarchy. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975a) she speaks of something she calls the 'other bisexuality' which is really a multi- or a-sexuality strongly reminiscent of the ontological hybridisation developed in Caribbean theory. Cixous wants the essential bisexuality of the unconscious to be uncovered; 'the ensemble of one and the other, not fixed in sequence of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another' (1975a,

p. 246). This 'incessant process of exchange' is the same process Harris engages in when he speaks from the position of historical marginality to reveal the illusion or at least the corrigibility of structure.

The most interesting possibilities for post-colonial theory come from feminist syntheses of the bisexual and maternal. Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a basis for feminists to posit that woman's being is a continuous plural process because of the pre-oedipal mother-daughter relationship which is subsequently suppressed. For Kristeva the maternal, paired with the paternal, represents a theoretical bisexuality, 'not androgyny but a metaphor designating the possibility of exploring all aspects of signification' (cited in Burke 1987, p. 112). The similarity here to Caribbean ideas of creolisation, and synthesis of old and new world (the maternal and paternal) becomes obvious. The bisexuality of the unconscious is not simply a union of the maternal and paternal but in post-colonial terms an openness to the continuing deferral of cultural identity. Within this kind of schema the notion of the 'national', despite the energies it displays for the assertion of difference and distinction, can be recognised as a fundamentally arbitrary designation which prepares the way for plurality and multiplicity. That it doesn't always, or even often do this, but solidifies into chauvinism and jingoism shows the power of the imperial/patriarchal working within all cultures, and the centrifugal forces which work to create new 'centres' of aesthetic, cultural or political domination.⁵

Whereas the bisexuality of the unconscious is analogous to post-colonial syncretism, the post-colonial perspective may also help to dismantle some of the unexamined assumptions which lie behind some terms of importance to feminism, such as the term 'the unconscious' itself. For the unconscious is not a subterranean locus, a kind of subliminal psychic bank which colonises all conscious experience in one way or another, but is an open field of possibility. The unconscious is that which lies beyond the margins, that which lies on the horizon of thought before thinking has brought it into being. The primordial content of being and identity can only be 'recovered' by being 'discovered' beyond the edges. And both the edges and the discoveries represent the most exciting aspects of these two discourses.

Ultimately, this paper can only point the way to those edges. Both feminism and post-colonialism are flawed by an insufficient awareness of each other and a shared propensity to solidify into a new orthodoxy. But a greater awareness of each other's strategies may lead to fusion of energies. Perhaps through the gaps and absences of this paper might emerge what has not yet been - a genuine post-colonial feminism.

NOTES

1. The term 'essentialism' as it is used in this paper refers to the assumption that groups or categories or classes have one or several identifying characteristics, shared by all members of that category and excluded from all non-members. Thus a feminine language must have characteristics not shared by males and demonstrated by all feminine users of the language for it to be regarded as an essentially female discourse.
2. Or, more precisely, the feeling that the potential for encoding feminine experience in language has not been harnessed. Language does not reflect experience in any simple ostensive way, but contributes to its formation.
3. Following this metaphor we might have to concede that post-colonial countries vary in this process. Countries such as India and Africa show a clear impulse to revert to a 'maternal' relationship with a coherent politico/cultural entity such as a nation. The settler cultures are the 'orphans' of place, and because they never had a 'maternal' relationship, the constructed relationship with the idea of a separate nation relies heavily on notions of place to compensate for confused and ambivalent notions of political identity.
4. The 'Law of the Father' refers to that moment in the child's development when she discovers that the father possesses the phallus and represents power in the world. At this point the oedipal phase fixes patriarchal language in the child's consciousness as the dominant form of discourse.
5. I would contend that chauvinism and jingoism as aggressive assertions of centrality are not fundamentally nationalist but imperialist, analogously stemming from a kind of Law of the Father which identifies the phallogentric focus of power in culture and history.

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